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House of Representatives

FILNER WILL FIGHT FOR THE BORDER ENVIRONMENT INFRASTRUCTURE FUND!

HON. BOB FILNER

OF CALIFORNIA
IN THE HOUSE OF
REPRESENTATIVES

Mr. FILNER. Madam Chairman, unfortunately I did not get a chance to offer an amendment with Mr. *Reyes* to provide an additional \$10 million for a critical program in the Interior-EPA Appropriations bill. The funds would have been used for “architectural, engineering, planning, design, construction and related activities in connection with the construction of high priority water and wastewater facilities in the area of the United States-Mexico Border, after consultation with the appropriate border commission.”

This is the section of the EPA’s State and Tribal Assistance Grants program that funds the Border Environment Infrastructure Fund (BEIF). The amendment would have transferred the \$10 million out of the U.S. Geological Survey’s (USGS) \$974.5 million appropriation. The USGS appropriation in this bill is currently \$39 million more than the FY2005 appropriation and \$41 million more than the president’s request. The border program, on the other hand, has been flat-funded at \$50 million for several years.

The record should reflect that we did not intend for the USGS’s National Water-Quality

Assessment (NAWQA) Program to be impacted by the reduction in USGS’s appropriation. NAWQA carries out very important work collecting and analyzing data and information in more than 50 major river basins and aquifers across the Nation in order to develop long-term information on streams, ground water, and aquatic ecosystems in support of sound management and policy decisions. This critical program would have been shielded from the \$10 million cut in USGS appropriations.

In Imperial County, California, the New River carries raw sewage from Mexico through the town of Calexico, and air pollution from Mexicali contributes to the worst childhood asthma rates in the state. A modest increase in funding for the BEIF would begin to improve the situation. The BEIF, which was established by the North American Development Bank to administer grant resources provided by the EPA, helps finance the construction of water and wastewater projects in the U.S.-Mexico border region.

The objective of the BEIF is to make environmental infrastructure projects affordable

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for communities throughout the U.S.-Mexico border region by combining grant funds with loans or other forms of financing. It is designed to reduce project debt to a manageable level in cases where users would otherwise face undue financial hardship.

We have seen what BEIF can accomplish when it has adequate funding. BEIF grants have played an important role in the successful construction of water conservation projects in the Cameron Irrigation District in Texas; a wastewater project in Heber, California; a wastewater collection and treatment project in Patagonia, Arizona; and a sewer system and wastewater treatment plant in the Salem and Ogaz communities in New Mexico.

All projects supported by the BEIF must have a health and/or ecological benefit in communities on the U.S. side of the border. All projects must also be certified in a rigorous vetting process undertaken by the Border Environment Cooperation Commission.

There is strong support for increasing BEIF funding. The bipartisan Border Governors' joint declaration last year called for a "substantial increase" in funding for the program.

While many important programs in the Interior-EPA Appropriations bill have been shortchanged, the lack of funding for BEIF is particularly troubling. The border region is in desperate need of assistance. Communities in the border region struggle with some of the highest poverty rates in the Nation as well as air and water pollution—often originating in northern Mexico—that contributes to severe public health problems. The region lacks basic infrastructure, such as water and sewer service, that most of the rest of the country takes for granted.

The neglect of these largely low-income and Hispanic communities, along with the dirty air and water they are forced to endure, represent a grave environmental injustice. According to the

U.S.-Mexico Border Health Commission, the border region includes three of the ten poorest counties in the United States and twenty-one counties that have been designated as economically distressed areas.

The Commission also reports that approximately 432,000 people live in 1,200 colonias in Texas and New Mexico, which are unincorporated, semi-rural communities that are characterized by substandard housing and unsafe public drinking water or wastewater systems. If the border region were made the 51st state in the Union, it would rank last in access to health care; second in death rates due to hepatitis; last in per capita income; and first in the numbers of school children living in poverty, according to the Commission

The Good Neighbor Environmental Board, an independent U.S. Presidential advisory committee that operates under the Federal Advisory Committee Act, recommends restoring BEIF to its mid-1990s funding level of \$100 million dollars.

There are currently 105 certified clean water projects in the pipeline waiting for funding. Examples of the many certified projects that could be carried out in disadvantaged communities if the BEIF had an appropriate funding level include: Water/wastewater systems improvements in Brawley, California; a wastewater project in Nogales, Arizona; a solid waste project in Doña Ana County, New Mexico; and a water conservation project in Brownsville, Texas.

Supporters of this amendment include the Border Trade Alliance, the Border Counties Coalition, Clean Water Action, National Council of La Raza and others.

I will continue fighting to increase appropriations for the Border Environment Infrastructure fund and protect communities in the border region.